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Conceptualizing Gender

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Conceptualizing Gender

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Signe Arnfred

Conceptualizing Gender

Contradictions in Cabo Delgado and beyond

In 1982 I was travelling in Cabo Delgado, one of the northern provinces of Mozambique, bordering to Tanzania. I was travelling as the head of a small brigade (three Mozambican women apart from myself) sent out by the National Women's Organization, the Organização da Mulher Moçambicana - OMM - in order to find out how the experience of the liberation war, at that time some eight years ago, had influenced the lives of the women.

The women of the northern part of the province greatly impressed me by the way they told about the events during the war, and how important it had been that they as women had been supported by Frelimo and the OMM. The war had meant hardship and suffering, but it had also been a long and important learning process for the women, and it had shown the possibility of different ways of life. The women made a sharp distinction between war-time OMM and post-war OMM, criticising the post-war OMM for passivity and indifference to women's problems. The women needed support now as before, but now they did not get it. They were bewildered, and angry. Discussing with women in other parts of the country I had met greater or lesser enthusiasm regarding the activities of OMM, but never before anger and well-argued political critique like this. I was very impressed.

But what really puzzled me was the fact that these same women defended the female initiation rites. As far as I knew, my knowledge being based on the OMM conception of the female initiation rites, these rituals were extremely oppressive and humiliating, confirming the subordinate position of women in society: "The initiation rites implant in the woman submission and total dependency of the man. The woman is conditioned to submit herself and gradually to assume self-inferiority."

(OMM 1977: 90) For the same reason the practice of these rites had been banned by Frelimo and by the OMM.

Thus I was faced with what from my point of view looked like a contradiction: Very articulate and politically conscious women insisting on the continued performance of woman-degrading rituals. Why? What was this all about?

A feeling I had had for some time somehow crystallized by this Cabo Delgado experience. After having lived in Mozambique and worked in the OMM for more than a year, a suspicion had emerged of my conceptions of gender, brought along from the European debate on socialism and feminism, being inadequate or unfit for grasping the realities of Mozambican women. My conceptions corresponded by and large to the conceptualizations of the OMM, based on socialist ideas of women's emancipation. But the actual women's realities were different. Approached with the concepts of socialist feminism, not much made sense.

Thus new concepts were needed. How are new concepts created? First of all I had to listen to the women. I had to listen and learn in attempts to find out what the world looked like from their points of view. In this case especially why it was so important for them to continue the practice of the initiation rites. Adding to the challenge of conceptualizations was the fact that even if I asked the women, they could not explain it to me. At least not in ways that I found satisfactory. They had been eloquent regarding their interests as women during the war. But the necessity of the initiation rites seemed to be beyond their own formulations.

This meant that I had to make interpretations, which anyhow is the task of the social scientist. Another consequence of this way of working was that I was running a constant dialogue between on the one hand the field experience and my interpretations of field 'findings', and on the other

hand my own women's movement conceptions of myself. Thus the conceptual endeavour was two-sided: Along with a reconceptualization of Mozambican women's reality went a critique and reconceptualization of my own cultural background, be it socialist and feminist, but also white, European and Protestant.

Central in all this are understandings and structurings of *sexuality*. Similar to my feeling of socialist-feminist concepts being inadequate for understanding the realities of Mozambique women, there was another feeling of the whole project of women's emancipation, as launched by the new women's movement (1970 onwards), being too narrow and too much defined by what it was up against. The visions of emancipation looked too much like women taking up male positions. The break with existing ways of thinking about and structuring of society did not seem radical enough. I was convinced (and still is) that this lack of radicality had to do with a too superficial and misconceived analysis and understanding of sexuality. A narrow and misconceived understanding of sexuality and of *the body* as such, of the materiality of the body, and of its capacities for pleasure and pain and for creation, not just of new life, but of new social life. The project of modernity, for which I see Descartes as spokesperson no. 1 (and Lenin as spokesperson no. 2), stresses the separation of mind and matter, and of mind and body. This separation has had, and still has, huge consequences for the way we organize society.

The project of reconceptualizing sexuality is part of a larger project of finding and stressing the links and connections between minds and bodies. They are not hard to find. They are there right in front of our noses. But they lack adequate conceptualizations. Take for instance caring for newborn infants. Newborn infants cannot be looked after by machines. Without love and tenderness, without care and contact with other human beings they will die. Everybody caring for newborn infants

practices an exercise of deep body/mind entanglement. Giving birth, breastfeeding and caring for newborn infants is not just trivial 'natural', 'biological'/processes, as they have been viewed by misogynist so-called science from Descartes onwards. Here a conscious effort of *de-naturalization* is called for.

Thus the reconceptualizations initiated by the Cabo Delgado experience work both ways: A search for new concepts in order to grasp the Mozambican women's situations, and at the same time a critical investigation of feminist conceptualizations of sexuality and the body.

As a matter of fact I have been struggling with this kind of issues for a number of years. This paper does not indicate any final position, rather it is just another report from the struggle.

The dialogue kind of process is reflected in the two major sections, the first of which is focusing on aspects of my Mozambique experience regarding which I felt a particular need for conceptual rethinking, while the second section is discussing Western conceptions of femininity and sexuality. The final section addresses an ongoing feminist discussion on equality/difference and constructivism/essentialism, still with the Mozambique experience in mind.

I: Identifying areas of conceptual importance.

a) Gendered worlds and borderlines. Problematizing sex/gender

For thinking about gender in Mozambique I have found it useful to turn the usual sex/gender conception upside down. In the women's movement there has been for decades a conception of a sex/gender system (cf. Gayle Rubin 1975) in terms of 'sex' being the biologically given division of humanity in men and women, while 'gender' denotes the socially and culturally constructed gender roles; sex = biology is seen as the point of departure, a kind of basic facts upon which different socio-cultural constructions of gender are built.

The intellectual/political motivation for this sex/gender thinking is evident. As put by Verena Stolcke: "The analytic concept of 'gender' is meant to challenge the essentialist and universalist dictum that 'biology is destiny'. It transcends biological reductionism by interpreting the relationships between women and men as cultural constructs which result from imposing social, cultural and psychological meanings upon biological sexual identities." (Verena Stolcke 1993:20) Biological determinism, biological essentialism, biological reductionism. A lot of the discussion between 'essentialism' and 'constructivism' starts here, one problem being that 'the body' has been seen as = 'biology' = 'essentialism', and made it hard to talk of giving birth or breastfeeding in unessentialist ways. The point raised by Maria Mies in 1986 is still valid: "The covert - or overt - biological determinism paraphrased in Freud's statement that anatomy is destiny, is perhaps the most deep-rooted obstacle to the analysis of the causes of women's oppression and exploitation. (...) One of our main problems is the fact that *not only the analysis as such, but also the tools of the analysis, the basic concepts and definitions, are affected - or rather infected - by biological determinism.*" (Maria Mies 1986:45, emphasis added, SA)

Turning sex/gender upside down does not eliminate these conceptual problems, but it does give a new approach. In northern Mozambique gender seemed to me to come before sex. The world appears to be divided along gender lines. Time is gendered: time of work and time of leisure is spent with other women. The time for encounters woman/man seems limited and restricted, compared to the time spent women together. Most of their day in fact women (in the rural setting I am referring to) will find themselves in the company of other women: In the field women work alone or in groups of women. It is rare to see a man and a woman working together in the same field; if they are there at the same time, most probably they will be doing different tasks. Women go off together hauling water or fetching firewood. Leisure time in the shadow at noon is spent with other women, resting, gossiping, braiding each other's hair. Similarly men spend time with men. *Space* is gendered too. In the old time rural compound there would be a specific space where the men of the household would meet to talk, to receive guests, and to have their food brought by their wives. This was male domain. Other parts of the compound would be female.

Songs, dances and rituals are gendered. A woman may join in in a man's dance, but everybody will know that this is a guest performance. According to a Portuguese anthropologist working in the south of Mozambique (José Fialho 1989) also crops, trees, fruits, tools etc. are gendered. Gifts are gendered: Some objects may be given as gifts to a woman, other objects as gifts to a man.

Two worlds, one male and one female, seem to be coexisting. They are interdependent and intertwined, but still they are separate, and the borderline between them has to be observed.

Into this divided world bodies are fitted in. Sex seems to follow from gender, more than the other way round. Ivan Illich (1982) elaborates a

similar point, with empirical reference not to Africa, but to European middle ages. "Gender distinguished places, times, tools tasks, forms of speech, gestures and perceptions that are associated with women from those associated with men. (...) Gender is in every step, in every gesture, and not just between the legs." (Ivan Illich 1982:68) Gender is not rooted in 'biology'. On the contrary gender as socio/culturally defined is the framework for interpretations of sex, of biology.

This is the (surprising) result of the investigations of the history of anatomy, undertaken by Thomas Laqueur (1990). Biological 'truths' are created, not found. (TL 1990:17). Anatomy as a 'science' regarding gender differences is no more 'scientific' than 19th century phrenology and other so-called sciences of race. "Difference and sameness, more or less recondite, are everywhere; but *which ones count and for what ends* is determined outside the bounds of investigation." (TL 1990:10, emphasis added, SA). Thomas Kuhn has argued convincingly that it is the paradigms, not the observations as such, which are decisive (cf. Thomas Kuhn 1970). But somehow the belief in 'science' as reflecting 'facts' is very persistent.

Thomas Laqueur shows all 'facts' about the human body to be based on interpretation: According to him the medieval conception of gender was of woman as a variation of man (what he calls the one-sex model). Similarities rather than differences between male and female organs were in focus of investigations. It was believed for instance, and scientifically shown, that orgasm in the female (as in the male) was a precondition for successful generation. The two-sex model of today, with its construction of man and woman as two different and opposed sexes, according to TL is a rather late occurrence (eighteenth century) matching epistemological and political developments of the time. Along with it came the passionless female. (TL 1990:3) "The dominant, though by no means universal, view since the eighteenth century has been that there are two stable,

incommensurable, opposite sexes and that the political, economic and cultural lives of men and women, their gender roles are somehow based on these 'facts'. Biology - the stable, ahistorical, sexed body - is understood to be the epistemic foundation for prescriptive claims about the social order. Beginning dramatically in the Enlightenment, there was a seemingly endless stream of books and chapters of books whose very titles belie their commitment to this new vision of nature and culture." (TL 1990:6). This opposed to the earlier texts conforming to the one-sex paradigm: "In these pre-Enlightenment texts (...) sex, or the body, must be understood as the epiphenomenon, while gender, what we would take to be a cultural category, was primary, or 'real'. Gender - man and woman - mattered a great deal and was part of the order of things; sex was conventional. (...) To be a man or a woman was to hold a social rank, a place in society, to assume a cultural role, not to be organically one or the other of two incommensurable sexes. Sex before the sixteenth century was still a sociological not an ontological category." (TL 1990:8).

Gendered worlds are defined by borderlines. Not all of them physical borders (as the invisible lines separating male space from female space) but normative borders, restrictions and rules, distinctions and definitions of male and female. An important part of the process of becoming man or woman is a process of getting acquainted with and learning to respect the boundaries of the respective worlds. In the initiation rites a new person is created, this transformation often marked by a new name. A child may transgress the borders of gender and age, this is not so important. But after the initiation rites when the child has been transformed into a grown up male or female, very different rules apply. The following are quotes from interviews in Cabo Delgado:

"In the initiation rites they explain to the child that now she has grown up, and thus she cannot any more just walk into the father's room. When a girl is small she may enter the room of the father, and she may play and

joke with the grown up people, but after the first menstruation this must stop. From now on she will have to show respect. She cannot approach another person unless with downcast eyes."

"At the initiation rites we tell the girl like this: From now on you have stopped being a child, now you have grown up, and you must show respect to other grown up people. When another adult person is talking to you, you mustn't look at this person directly like this, you'll have to lower your eyes."

Respectful behaviour is restricted behaviour, respecting the norms and rules of male and female worlds. The freedom of childhood is replaced by formality and controlled behaviour, respecting boundaries¹.

¹ I have been inspired to the focus on borderlines by reading Fatima Mernissi: *Dreams of Trespass* (1994) a beautiful and charming book in which she tells about her own childhood in a traditional household in Fez, and about the importance of the sacred frontiers, *hudud*, among others the borderline between men and women, preventing the women from doing lots of things that otherwise they would have liked to do. Being educated, her teacher in the coran school said, is knowing *hudud*, sacred frontiers (FM 1994: 9) Fatima Mernissi is writing about a Muslim, urban setting in northern Africa. The actual borderlines will be different in Mozambique. But the concept of gendered worlds and borderlines may work for Mozambique as well.

b) Intimacy and formality

Another consequence of gendered worlds and borderlines is that sexual encounters take place at the borderlines, and as such (in the extreme) may be seen as a kind of diplomatic missions: strict formality has to be observed. Intimacy on the other hand is to be found in women-only (or men-only) gatherings. I stress this point because of the contrast to the common Western notion of the sexual encounter as intimacy and privacy par excellence.

Interviewing women in Cabo Delgado, and in other parts of Mozambique, I was often struck by the extreme formality of sexual encounters, and of the communication between husband and wife. I don't think it is always like that, and I do know cases of close companionship and friendship between husband and wife. But recurrent tales about prescribed ways of communication between husband and wife tell another story. Of the following prescriptions the first one is from the north, the following two from the south of Mozambique:

"When the woman is menstruating, she'll put red *missangas* [a string of glassbeads] on the bed for the husband to know that she is not in good conditions. When she is in good conditions - that is when the menstruation has stopped - she'll put white *missangas* on the bed, thus informing the husband that she's fine again." (Everywhere in Mozambique sexual intercourse during menstruation is tabooed.)

"After the sexual act the woman has to clean the penis of the husband with her hands, or with a moist piece of cloth, and likewise she will be cleaning herself. Then she'll have to rub the penis with oil of *ricino* [a very specific ointment used for sexual and ritual purposes] in order to keep it soft and smooth. If the woman fails to observe these rules of hygiene and favour to the husband, he will report the situation to an older

woman of the family, who subsequently will prepare *upswa* [maize porridge] and send a wooden spoon full of crusts of porridge to the girl's parents house, thus letting them know that their daughter did not know how to look after her husband."

"One week before the wedding the girl will be told that she has to keep her husband clean of pubic hair. She must shave herself as well. If she happens not to do it properly or to forget about it, the husband will let her parents know. This he'll do in the following manner: He'll get hold of a young chicken, deplume it, leaving just the feathers at the rump and take it to the house of his parents-in-law. There he'll walk into the kitchen, and when seeing his mother-in-law he'll take out the chicken of the basket he used for carrying it, leave it there on the floor and walk out just like that. The mother-in-law hurriedly will hide the chicken in order for nobody else to see it and run to the grandmother's house, telling her that this very day she'll have to go and talk to the daughter."

Judging from stories like these one would think that wife and husband were without the use of language. Why don't they *talk* to each other? Why doesn't the wife just tell the husband that her menstruation has started? Why doesn't the husband just remind the young wife that she is supposed to do this and that? Presumably this is increasingly what actually happens. But the very existence of the above stories about how communication ought to take place reminds one of borderlines, relations of power and sexual diplomacy.

As a contrast to this formality, stands the informality and relaxed atmosphere of women-only gatherings. I witnessed it several times, for instance while resting at noon in the shade of a tree or a veranda: women braiding each other's hair, gossiping, relaxing. Or in some of the meetings I conducted, asking questions about the women's lives. This is

an account of the atmosphere of these meetings, based on fieldwork notes:

"I never was present in a celebration of the female initiation rites, but in some of the meetings with just women present, when discussing sexual pleasures and secret lovers, the atmosphere at times would rise to unknown heights; the roof of the hut where the meeting was held would be almost lifted with laughter, when for example a woman illustrated her story of how on one occasion a very nice young man - not her husband - had passed by and how they had later arranged a meeting in the *mato* [the bush], with a pantomime showing how he had walked and how she had felt etc. In between of course there would be lots of jokes that I did not understand, and which were not translated because the local interpreter was as sick with laughter as the rest of the women present, and there would be certain movements with the hips which seemed to have specific connotations (judging from the applause) apart from what with a Western cultural background you could plainly see. The same would be true of the singing and the dancing. The women seemed to forget that this was a meeting, and when for a moment she had caught her breath the interpreter leaned over to me and said that this was just like the initiation rites."

Jorge and Margot Dias in their study of the Maconde of Cabo Delgado have made similar observations of formality and intimacy as the ones I am putting forward here. From their impression of the celebrations of female initiation rites they write: "Evidently these women, *in the presence of men always behaving with dignity, delicacy and self control*, were determined on this occasion to compensate, temporarily to shake themselves free from all the burdens society had put upon them. The initiates were the only ones of whom nobody took notice. They would be sitting for hours in the same posture, heads bent down, forgotten about by everyone, while right next to them all this exuberant and explosive

life of rare intensity would be going on." (Dias & Dias 1970, III:233, my emphasis, SA)

c) Hierarchies of age (seniority)

Dias and Dias' observation regarding the contrast between the grown up women gathered in the initiation hut, and the young initiates, leads me directly into the next point that I want to discuss, which is the hierarchies of age. In the woman-only gatherings all relations are not always playful. Hierarchies of age and status are at work. Studying the female initiation rites it is evident that generally the young initiates are terrorized by the older women, and on the whole they are frightened stiff because they don't know what is going to happen.

I have already mentioned my impression that woman/woman relations occupy more space in the lives of women than man/woman relations. I would add to this that young women are more oppressed and restricted by woman/woman hierarchies of status and seniority than they are oppressed by men. Age and status hierarchies between women certainly may be pretty vicked. They have a special aspect, however, which make them different from male/female relations of oppression: Most of them change in foreseeable ways during a life cycle. The young girls at the initiation rites are oppressed today, but tomorrow they will be the ones having fun and games while terrorizing a new set of youngsters. Similarly when marrying into a patrilinear household the young daughter-in-law will be at the bottom of the status-ladder, having to serve and being evaluated critically by everybody else, and in particular by the mother-in-law. But with time, giving birth to sons who grow up and marry, the young woman will advance to mother-in-law herself. Other woman/woman hierarchies are more stable, like the relations for instance between the senior wife and the junior wife/wives of a (patrilinear) polygamous household. But then again these hierarchies are not just and only oppressive. In southern Mozambique the relation between

polygamous wives is seen ideally as a relation between sisters, older and younger sisters of course, but ideally a relation of solidarity and support, not in spite of the age hierarchy, but rather with the age hierarchy as an active factor, the older sister maybe enjoying privileges, but also having more responsibilities than the younger ones. On the whole I find that relations of seniority are little investigated, and poorly theorized. The same is true of hierarchical relations as not just oppressive. In the Western political tradition equality looms large. So large as to make us interpret almost all non-equal relations as suspect, oppressive, reactionary. I do not want to disregard elements of oppression, but I do want to point to other possible aspects of hierarchical relationships, like for instance parent/child relationships, older/younger brothers and sisters, and relationships of apprenticeship. Under certain conditions hierarchical relationships may be benevolent and supportive. And certainly they are a condition for most learning, in one way or another.

d) Sexuality

All of my points up till now have been concerned with rethinking gender, problematizing recurrent figures of Western feminist thought, with a point of departure in observations and impressions of *gender relations* (man/woman, and woman/woman) in Mozambique, the strongest impressions emerging from meetings with women of Cabo Delgado.

The following observations continue along similar lines, only now with a stronger focus on female *gender identity*. How did these women perceive themselves as women? What is this: to be a woman all about? Actually I did not phrase the questions like this. After the puzzlement of the initial contradiction (see above) I was keen to find out what was actually going on in the initiation rites, and why the women seemed to be so fond of them. Part of the answer to this question was given above in the sections on intimacy/formality and on hierarchies of age. But investigating into

the female initiation rites, I was strongly struck by the way these women, collectively as women, managed their own sexuality.

In Western European culture sexuality has been fucked up in intricate ways that I am not going to try here to disentangle. Somehow in our culture sexuality parades as 'natural', even if the way sexuality is expressed and acted out of course is culture through and through. What greatly impressed me about the management of female sexuality in northern Mozambique was that sexuality was not seen as 'natural'. Sexual behaviour is something you have to learn, much in the same way as you learn to ride a bicycle: There is an element of *physical practice*: you must learn to move in particular ways, and there is an element of *learning the rules*, for bicycling the rules of traffic, for sexual behaviour the rules of married sexual life (as for instance the rules referred to when discussing intimacy/formality above). Nobody would expect you to be able to ride a bicycle on the first attempt. Or, taking another example, to be good at skiing. These are bodily capacities that are acquired through instruction and training. In Mozambique a similar rationality is applied regarding sexual behaviour: You have to learn how to do. Sexual competence is considered part of the female education. One point about the initiation rites is that having passed the rites, the girls are supposed to be fully capable female members of society; they must know how to cultivate, cook and look after children. And they must know how to make love.

This is how they are taught in the province of Sofala:

"The *conselheira* [the instructor, usually an old woman] goes underneath, and the girl goes on top of the lady, who then begins to move. The girl will follow the movements of the lady in order to learn how she is doing. She'll do so during some days, or even during a whole week. In the course of this time the girl will even have tried to be in the position underneath in order better to learn the required movements." "The girl will be lying on her back, the old woman on top of her, teaching her the

flexibility and all the gestures that go with the sexual act. In spite of all the efforts of the girls, in some cases it is difficult for them to get it all right. In these cases the instructor will apply punitive measures, as she will fit a needle into the mat underneath the girl, picking her during the movements and gestures that she'll have to make, forcing her thus to keep in the best position for a good result of the teaching."

In some areas a symbolic and/or ritual intercourse is part of the initiation rites. Often in northern Mozambique the girl will have a sexual partner already before she reaches puberty. In some places it is even believed that lovemaking is what makes the breasts grow and what calls forth the menstruation. The symbolic/ritual intercourse is just to make sure "that the girl does not return to her parents still a virgin" ie. as sexually inexperienced and incompetent.

Interpreted in the context of a male dominance/female subordination paradigm this aspect of the female initiation rites may be seen as yet another indication of female oppression: The young women have to struggle and toil in order to be able to serve and please their husbands in all thinkable ways, including sexually. Seen in the context of a 'gendered worlds' paradigm however, other aspects come into focus. For instance, importantly, that female sexual training is a women's affair. If occasionally men participate, they do so in very particular capacities, and commanded by women. Female sexuality is developed in the women's world, managed and run by women. Even with the hierarchies of age and status, the older terrorizing and punishing the young etc., still they all share a female gender identity. And having learned their trade as sexual beings, the women can also take pride in being good. Like this old woman from the province of Zambézia: "I am an old woman, but when I apply this pomade [oil of *ricino*] I am turning young, and whichever man that grab me would be satisfied sleeping with me. He would be so satisfied that the next morning he would pick up the hoe and go to the field, working to his heart's content." Female sexuality is managed by

women. And not just in order to please men. The women frequently stressed their own sexual pleasure. In parts of the north it is a legitimate cause for divorce if the woman does not feel sexually satisfied in marriage.

That 'development' - economic development as well as religious conversion to Christianity - push in the direction of individualism and male dominance is another story. This means that changes are in process, transforming what used to be women-managed female sexuality into individual male/female sexual relationships commanded by the man.

e) The body an artefact

Preparation for sexuality is not only movements. The body itself is prepared as part of the construction of femininity. In two very different aspects, both of them closely related to sexual intercourse. One is the *prolongation of the small vaginal lips*. The girls are instructed regarding this from 7-8 years of age, ie. well before puberty. The pulling has to be done every day, and as can be imagined it does take some time, years, before a satisfactory result (vaginal lips of a finger's length) has been achieved. The pulling is done in groups of girls, hidden away in the bush. No man is supposed to come near. "Groups of girls will go to the dense bush about 3 o'clock in the morning each of them carrying a *capulana* [piece of cloth] to be used as a cover once the work starts, because they will be sitting like somebody giving birth to a child. On the first day they'll be given instructions by the *mandrinha* about how to proceed, and after that each of the girls will continue on her own, using a certain pomade [oil of *ricino*] to facilitate the process." The point of this prolongation, according to the women (and men), is to increase sexual pleasure for the women as well as for the men. Take as evidence this report from a group discussion in the province of Zambézia: "The extended vaginal lips have the advantage of working as a brake on the penis at the time of the sexual intercourse, that is, it secures the slow

entrance of the penis, tightly fitting around it, so as to let the man as well as the woman feel aroused."

Body tattoos, like the prolonged vaginal lips, is a preparation of the body seen as closely linked to female sexuality. Or maybe sexual femininity would be a more fitting expression. Tattoos are made, for example on the lower part of the stomach, on the lower part of the back, and on the frontal part of the thighs. Making the tattoos again is a woman/woman enterprise. According to what I was told, tattooing begins during the initiation rites, and is continued in intervals after that: "These tattoos don't have a fixed time. The first ones are made when the girl is still in the house of the initiation rites; the next ones maybe after two-three months of marriage, and so on. The woman may have tattoos made throughout her life. It is the women themselves who make the tattoos. They'll make an agreement to meet at the river, and then they'll make the tattoos on one another respectively. They'll bring a knife and charcoal powder. It hurts a lot and your clothes will be full of blood." "The tattoos have sexual functions being stimulating to the man. And to the woman they bring beauty." Previously in northern Mozambique the body was embellished in several other ways as well: Women would have tattoos in their faces as well, and pointed plugs in their upper lips. On festive occasions the bodies would be painted.

But with development and modernity all of this increasingly is seen as old fashioned and primitive. Modernity demands 'natural' bodies. First the 'natural' could be questioned, and second one can speculate: Why? Also today, in our society, bodies are manufactured, but along very different lines, slimming being predominant among women. Slimming is interpreted as aggression towards and alienation from one's own body. Maybe I am romanticising at this point, but I see the vaginal lip pulling in the woman-woman context described (maybe to a lesser extend the

tattoos) as ways of acquisition of and being acquainted with one's own body, including its capacities for sexual pleasure.

II: Enlightenment legacies concerning sexuality

As it has been pretty clear in the above section my choice of topics, or what struck me as impressive or remarkable or astonishing regarding gender relations and gender identity in Mozambique, has been seen explicitly from the vantage point of and in contrast to my own position as a Western, European woman, of Protestant Christian culture. The dialogue is already there, at least implicitly. What I want to do now is to focus more explicitly on aspects of my own culture regarding sex and gender that I (and others) see as being in need of reconceptualization. My choice of aspects is prompted by my Mozambique experience, the arguments supported by more recent feminist literature.

a) Descartes

The thinking of René Descartes (1596 - 1650) is a cornerstone in modern dichotomous thinking. Previously the world had been seen as an organic whole (cf. Carolyn Merchant 1980 regarding these aspects of the history of science) but Descartes introduced the distinction between *res cogitans* and *res extensa*. By doing so he installed a clear dividing line between mind and matter.

Res cogitans are 'thinking things' ie. the human mind, following the laws of logic. *Res extensa* are material things, inert matter following physical and mechanical laws. Plants, animals and the human body are included in *res extensa*, and as inert matter they are controlled by the human mind. This places the human mind as outside and over outer nature as well as inner nature (the human body). The mind, having been separated from the body, locus of sex, is per se genderless. But like the angels of the Bible (also in principle genderless, but carrying male names: Michael,

Gabriel) the human mind somehow turns out male: The in principle a-sexual human mind is the mind of a man. Thus apparent gender neutrality gives way for unisex male thinking, uncontested by the kind of thoughts that might derive from female experience.

Not only female experience is ruled out; the same thing happens to male and female common sense, as well as to artistic and religious thinking. All of this is deemed irrational, which in my Webster's Dictionary is synonymous to senseless, silly, ridiculous. Previously even 'scientific' (or maybe rather pre-scientific) thinking, according to Carolyn Merchant (1980) had taken account of a double-gendered world comprising men and women. As long as the world was conceived as a living organism, gender as a matter of course was a structuring feature. But with Descartes and his followers nature is viewed as a machine, commanded and moved by external forces. As object for male investigation and control it is in a position similar to the female one. The Cartesian dichotomy of mind / matter may look innocent from a gender point of view. But a closer look 'mind' turns out to be male, whereas 'body' and 'nature' are associated to femaleness. The Cartesian dichotomies - recognizable as a general figure in what is now called Enlightenment thinking - not only divide the world in two. The dichotomies are *exclusive*, disregarding and making invisible what might fall between or beyond, or belong to a totally different dimension, and *hierarchical*: one side controls, the other is controlled. The basic mind/matter dichotomy go along with a host of other, similar ones, for example culture/nature (where culture is the 'man-made', produced, nature the raw material for human production); rationality/irrationality; subject/object; thought/feeling; facts/values. In each case one side of the dichotomy has male connotations, the other one female. The distribution of gender connotations is very systematic: Culture, rationality, subject, thought, facts are male. Nature, irrationality, object, feeling, value are female. Applied to sexuality it matches what Thomas Laqueur describes as the two-sex model. Man and woman are seen as

opposites, man controlling, woman controlled. Bodies are seen as biology, nature, and woman being closer to nature thus more body than man - which is yet another legitimation for control. Evidently the feminist sex / gender division is part and parcel of this dichotomous thinking.

Dichotomous thinking must be criticised, deconstructed, as with this kind of thinking hierarchies and exclusions are constantly reproduced. As strategies against dichotomous thinking I will suggest the following: 1) Watch out. Dichotomous thinking pops up everywhere. 2) Try to think in *both/and* instead of *either/or*. Which are the *links* between mind/matter, nature/culture etc. 3) Notice the surroundings: what may be *excluded* by the dichotomies? Critique of dichotomies is a necessary procedure for reconceptualization.

Deconstruction according to Derrida is exactly a method for attacking dichotomies. I refer to a secondary source (Joan W. Scott 1988): "The method consists of two related steps: the reversal and displacement of binary oppositions. This double process reveals the interdependence of seemingly dichotomous terms and their meaning relative to a particular history. It shows them to be not natural but constructed oppositions, constructed for particular purposes in particular contexts. (...) Deconstruction then is an important exercise, for it allows us to be critical of the way in which ideas we want to use are ordinarily expressed, exhibited in patterns of meaning that may undercut the ends we seek to obtain." (Joan W. Scott 1988:38) Joan Scott is elaborating this point in the context of a discussion on *equality vs. difference*, which she - by the methods given - shows to be a not at all opposites, but intimately interlinked. I shall return to this discussion in the last section.

b) Virginity and passionlessness: The female eunuch

The celebration of virginity in Western culture is (as I see it) closely linked to the Cartesian dichotomies and the two-sex model. Virginity means male control of female sexuality. Active female sexuality is supposed to be either nonexistent (the Victorian idea of passionlessness) or kept under strict control, by the parents until the wedding day, and after that by the husband. Islam too celebrates virginity; this is a quote from a Muslim man, in the coastal areas of the province of Nampula, Mozambique: "The duration of the female initiation rites is one month or more. During this time the girl will be kept in a house night and day so that her skin is turning brighter. The day when she leaves the house is the day of her wedding. All this is done in order for the man, who is going to marry her, to feel or think that *today I shall initiate a new vagina in its history of life.*" (Emphasis added, SA)

Female passionlessness in Western culture is a Victorian creation. At the time of the witch hunts women were not considered passionless, on the contrary their insatiable carnal lust was seen as a threat to men and to social life. For a long time women were considered "more prone to excess of passion because their rational control was seen as weaker." (Nancy F.Cott 1978: 222) Following the Cartesian dichotomies women were closer to nature, thus more at the mercy of sexual drives than men. This goes along with Thomas Laqueur's one sex model (discussed in an earlier section of this paper): Women felt sexual impulses comparable to men's, however with less capacity of self-control. The gradual change between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries to a conception of female passionlessness seems to have a lot to do with the Protestant church. In Christianity the double image of uncontrolled female sexuality in alliance with the devil vs. the prudent and obedient bourgeois married wife was developed with an emphasis on the latter, creating an idea of women as *morally superior* compared to lustful men. In an Anglo-American context, as studied by Nancy F.Cott "Evangelical Protestants constantly reiterated the theme that Christianity had raised

women from slaves in status to moral and intellectual beings. The tacit condition for that elevation was the suppression of female sexuality. (...) The evangelical view, by concentration on women's spiritual nature, simultaneously elevated women as moral and intellectual beings and disarmed them of their sexual power." (Nancy F.Cott 1978: 227-228)

This description fits surprisingly well what happened in Mozambique, where especially the Protestant church boasts of seeing women as equal, giving equal education opportunities to girls and boys, at the same time however abhorring and rejecting every indication of active female sexuality. (Cf. Signe Arnfred 1990). Sexually autonomous women were seen as obstacle number one to Christianity. Thus monogamous marriage was high on the list as a precondition for civilization. In the eyes of the missionaries monogamous marriage means domestication of wild female sexuality, now put under male control.

In her paper on Victorian sexual ideology Nancy F.Cott goes on to show how this image of passionlessness became actively promoted by Western women themselves: "Passionlessness served women's larger interests by downplaying altogether their sexual characterization, which was the cause of their exclusion from significant 'human' (ie. male) pursuits." (Nancy F.Cott 1978: 233) This is an important point. In the two-sex model world of 'anatomy is destiny', downplaying 'anatomy', and with it sexuality, was seen as the only way to escape the women's destiny and become equal to men. Even in the radical and pathbreaking work of Simone de Beauvoir: *The Second Sex* (1949) this denial of the female body is taken as a condition for equality. Right until the new women's movement of the 1970's onwards, the basis and framework for gender equality was female passionlessness and asexuality: the female eunuch.

c) Female body seen with male eyes

In mainstream Western culture two mutually exclusive images of the post-adolescent female body prevail: Women as sexual objects vs. women as mothers. As mothers women are seen as asexual. Whether as the worshipped pedestal-woman, Madonna (combining virginity with motherhood), or as the housewife/matron, motherhood is uninteresting from a male sexual point of view - and thus considered non-sexual. Writing about *controlling images* of black femininity Patricia Hill Collins identifies among others the black wet-nurse, the Mammy: "The mammy (...) is a desexed individual. The mammy is typically portrayed as overweight, dark, and with characteristically African features - in brief, as an unsuitable sexual partner for white men. (...) The mammy represent the clearest example of the split between sexuality and motherhood present in Eurocentric masculinist thought." (Patricia HillCollons 1991:78) Images of white and black femininity are not identical. There are important differences, also because "images of Black womanhood serve as a reservoir for the fears of Western culture, 'a dumping ground for those female functions a basically puritan society could not confront.'" (Barbara Christian 1985, quoted by Patricia Hill Collins 1991:72). But there are similarities as well. As regarding the asexual mammy/matron, and regarding her counterpart, the Jezebel, the sexually aggressive women, the whore. (PHC 1991:77)

The split between sexuality and motherhood is actually felt by many western women, and said to be responsible for the steep decline in breastfeeding in post-war USA. (Marta Salokosky 1995). I remember myself struggling with the dilemma of being a mother vs. being a sexual partner in the months after having my first child. On the other hand I also felt giving birth, breastfeeding and cuddling the tiny infant as acts related to sexuality, but I was bewildered regarding how to identify these

feelings. I lacked an image of motherhood as sexual. Later I discovered that other women had been thinking and feeling along similar lines. For instance Barbara Sichtermann, who writes: "Breastfeeding is an expression of female sexuality. Today however you don't find neither a consciousness, and understanding, a culture or just a vague idea of the sexual potency of breastfeeding. It seems unnecessary to point out that patriarchy is guilty of this exclusion, because its egocentricity of course had to ignore this expression of human sexuality." (Barbara Sichtermann 1984:68) What we call sexuality is defined and limited by male experience. Women are conceived as sexual (or: women's sexuality is acknowledged) only to the extent that they participate in what man define as sexual. Even for the relative 'free' woman, the female *bohème* of the first part of this century, Barbara Sichtermann points out, sexuality had to do with "the act of love, with *coitus*, and the way that led to it. All what (might) follow was 'procreation', not sexuality, it was a burden and a pain, it was a duty." (BS 1984:69) Adrienne Rich is scrutinizing myths of motherhood with similar scepticism. All this talk about pain: "A woman preparing to swim the English Channel, or to climb in high altitudes, is aware that her system will undergo stress, her courage will be tested, and her life may even be in danger; but despite the demands to be expected on her heart, her lungs, her muscular condition, her nerves during such an effort, she thinks of it primarily in terms not of pain but of challenge. The majority of women. literate or illiterate, come to childbirth as a charged, discrete happening: mysterious, sometimes polluted, often magical, as torture rack or as 'peak experience'. Rarely has it been viewed as one way of knowing and coming to terms with our bodies, of discovering our physical and psychic resources." (Adrienne Rich 1977:157) According to Adrienne Rich (and I agree) in order to understand childbirth, a whole new approach to knowledge is needed, far beyond Cartesian dichotomies: "To separate sense from emotion, body from mind, is hardly useful when we are trying to understand the whole of female experience, and in particular a function - childbirth - so

charged with unconscious and subjective power, and so dramatic in its psychic sensations." (AR 1977:157) Birth giving and lactation have been doubly distorted in Western culture. First by being seen as trivial, biological processes, central indications of the fact of women being parts of nature, and secondly by being disconnected to sexuality. For reconceptualization thus a double move is needed, a) de-naturalization, and b) re-sexualization.

This is also the agenda of Adrienne Rich. Her visions are far-reaching. I'll quote her because I see her visions as congenial to my own efforts of trying to conceive of sexuality in different ways, maybe as she suggests, by *thinking through the body*. "I have come to believe (...) that female biology - the diffuse, intense sensuality radiating out from clitoris, breasts, uterus, vagina; the lunar cycles of menstruation; the gestation and fruition of life which can take place in the female body - has far more radical implications than we have yet come to appreciate. Patriarchal thought has limited female biology to its own narrow specifications. The feminist vision has recoiled from female biology for these reasons; it will, I believe, come to view our physicality as a resource, rather than a destiny. In order to live a full human life we require not only control of our bodies (though control is a prerequisite); we must touch the unity and resonance of our physicality, our bond with the natural order, the corporeal ground of our intelligence." (AR 1977:39) "In arguing that we have by no means yet explored or understood our biological grounding, the miracle and paradox of the female body and its spiritual and political meanings, I am really asking whether women [- and men, SA] cannot begin, at last, to *think through the body*." (AR 1977: 284, emphasis in original.)

Equality/difference; constructivism/essentialism

a) Equality / difference

Equality/difference is an age-old debate in the women's movement. Equality defenders are stressing the importance of individual civil rights, democracy, women's access to power on equal footing with men, etc. Difference defenders are criticising 'equality' for being on male terms, women becoming like men is no solution. Instead they stress the importance of the different experience and perspectives represented by women, the ways in which women can contribute with other types of knowledge and alternative visions.

Joan W. Scott (1988) argues convincingly that this apparent contradiction is no contradiction at all: "A binary opposition has been created to offer a choice to feminists, of either endorsing 'equality' or its presumed antithesis 'difference'. In fact, the antithesis itself hides the interdependence of the two terms, for equality is not the elimination of difference, and difference does not preclude equality." (Joan Scott 1988:38) The usual misconception is that *equality* implies *identity* (ie. elimination of difference) and that *difference* implies *hierarchy* (ie. inequality). This is a splendid example of hierarchical, exclusive dichotomies at work. But think a second time: "If individuals or groups were identical, there would be no need to ask for equality," argues Joan Scott. "Equality might well be defined as deliberate indifference to specified differences." (Joan Scott 1988:44) Thus she has shown that in actual fact equality and difference are interdependent.

This is a good point, for it also gives a new awareness to the feminist struggle: The struggle for equality must be well aware of the ground on which it takes place: On which terms should what kind of equality be

fought for? Equality as well as difference are important tools in feminist struggle. But deceptive tools.

Equality. In Mozambique gender equality was quite a new idea, in fact. In the 'gendered worlds' context equality had not been an issue. Power balance yes. But not equality. Maybe because 'equality' in the socialist feminist edition was seen (not surprisingly) in the binary opposition way, ie. as opposed to difference and equal to identity. In the context of the OMM, women's equality meant women doing male jobs, women as tractor drivers. At the same time, of course, women were supposed to be wives and mothers. The theoretical socialist solution to this contradiction is state (or collectively) organized housework and child care, ie. minimizing as far as physically possible what biologically distinguishes women from men. In Mozambique this option of course was not available, creating the well known situation of a double workload for women.

I am ambivalent to 'equality' in this conception as a tool of struggle in the Mozambiquan setting. On one hand much of the women's struggles (for instance during the liberation war) for pushing and breaking open the borderlines of the gendered worlds was conceived in terms of equality. The very experience of man/woman equality (as when doing tasks for Frelimo during the war) was a part of this process. On the other hand the limitations of the socialist women-tractor-driver equality are also apparent. It was sad to witness the blindness of the OMM to the specific qualities from women's point of view in the traditionally matrilinear kinship arrangements. To the OMM equality was = modernity. They did not speculate why modernity apparently had to be patrilinear. A quote from Elizabeth Grosz: "A feminism of equality is unable adequately to theorize sexual and reproductive equality" (Elizabeth Grosz 1994) captures some of my scepticism towards 'equality'.

Difference. If equality is deceptive, difference is even worse. First because 'difference' means so many different things. I'll *focus on four different* meanings, each with their own problems².

1. Difference as description. This is the kind of difference that I was referring to above in the equality/difference discussion. Difference as pointing to the fact that women (or blacks etc.) may be different from some supposedly universal norm (eg. white, male), and maybe even celebrating specific female capacities, women's priorities etc. This kind of difference is important in order to challenge the 'norm' and point to other aspects, qualities, possibilities. The danger here is essentialism, to which I shall return below.

2. Difference as tool of analysis. This is difference as an analytical tool, as when used in deconstruction and critique of dichotomous ways of thinking, and on the whole for critique of discourses of power. Posing

² The list of 'differences' below is not complete. The important thing here has been to point to the tricky character of the word 'difference'. Especially because it is so much in vogue these days. Scores of book titles celebrate the word. From my own bookshelf the following: "A Passion for Difference", "Discourses of Difference", "The Essential Difference", "Patterns of Dissonance" etc.

questions like: Who are they talking about? Women? 'Women' is not a uniform category. Which type of women? And so forth. Difference thus may be a dismantling tool.

3. But difference is also a *tool of power*. The binary opposition kind of thinking works exactly by creating differences. *Hierarchical* and *exclusive* differences. Against this kind of differences it is important to be alert, as previously discussed. This kind of differences also sneak into academic writings. 'Race' as a concept has disappeared from academia since the second world war. But writings on 'ethnicity' are booming. This is a fairly recent phenomenon. Why?

Difference as tool of power also works in practice, on the ground. Powerful, hierarchical and exclusive uses of difference are prevalent in world politics today, Just as a tiny example from the secluded realms of reality in which I myself move around: Until recently there was one exit in the airport of Copenhagen. Now there are two, dividing EU citizens from non-EU citizens. Why?

4. *Difference as tool of liberation: Diversity*. For all these dubious aspects of difference, it is important not to forget the important and necessary ones: Connecting across differences, learning from others, multiculturalism, etc. Joan Scott suggest a resolution to what she calls the 'difference dilemma' which is not so different from what I have just discussed. Importantly she is also pointing to a positive, ambiguous, floating kind of difference as something that should be aimed at. This is what she writes: " The resolution of the 'difference dilemma' comes neither from ignoring nor embracing difference as it is normatively constituted. Instead, it seems to me, the critical feminist position must always involve *two* moves: The first is *the systematic criticism of the operations of categorical difference*, the exposure of the kinds of exclusions and inclusions - the hierarchies - it constructs, and a refusal of their ultimate 'truth'. A refusal, however not in the name of an equality

that implies sameness or identity, but rather [and this is the second move] *in the name of an equality that rests on differences* - differences that confound, disrupt and render *ambiguous* the meaning of any fixed binary opposition. (...) Power is constructed on and so must be challenged on the ground of difference." (Joan Scott 1988: 48, emphasis added, SA)

b) **Constructivism/essentialism**

Constructivism and essentialism both are offsprings of the 'difference'-side of the equality/difference juxtaposition. This discussion in feminism is not quite as old as the other one, still it has been on for a decade (at least in the US). The problems with this new juxtaposition (dichotomies breed dichotomies!) are in some ways similar to the ones just discussed. Similar is the impossibility of the choice, and the necessity of rejecting the either/or, opting instead for the both/and.

It is too easy to finish here, however. It is also too easy to say essentialism: bad, constructivism: good. Even if this is the general tendency. Going back to dichotomies previously discussed, **constructivism** is like the 'gender' side of the sex/gender division. The point of view (roughly) that things are not given by nature, but socially, culturally, historically constructed. *Context* is another *in-word* belonging to this line of thought. Everything discussed should be contextualized; 'truth' is not the issue, but interpretations and positionality. I agree to most of this, the problem being not so much what 'constructionalists' do, but rather what they do *not* do. The danger of 'constructivism' I think is a risk of losing touch with material reality, and with politics and power. **Essentialism** on the other hand: Essentialism takes off from the 'biological' side of the sex/gender dichotomy, and this is *danger no. 1*. Essentialism commonly understood somehow is rooted in 'biology', the specific character of the female body. Which is getting very close to 'biology is destiny' once more. *Danger no. 2*: For the same reason essentialism often will be supporting conservative forces. This about women being different, is

precisely what male bourgeois society has always said: Men are naturally inclined for transcendence, women for immanence. Men should be the providers, women should look after the young. Etc. It was exactly against this point of view that the struggle for equality was originally launched. In the Nazi edition it was *Kinder, Kirche, Küche*. In the New Right in the USA it is anti-abortion, women as mothers, protection of life. In this context, however, it is important to ask *how* the difference male/female is conceived, and *who* defines it for whom?

Danger no. 3: Romantization. The dichotomy male/female is turned upside down: Male is bad, female is the best. Society as such should take a point of departure in female values. An example of this is Vandana Shiva (1989) Development = mal-development = *male* development, mechanistic etc. Women are closer to nature. The women/nature link, is turned into new salvation: "To say that women and nature are intimately associated is not to say anything revolutionary. After all, it was precisely just such an assumption that allowed the domination of both women and nature. The new insight provided by rural women in the Third World is that women and nature are associated *not in passivity but in creativity and in the maintenance of life*." (Vandana Shiva 1989:47, emphasis in original.) However. Even if it may be criticized for romantization, Vandana Shiva's contribution is important, in my view. Her account is rooted in political struggle, and her book is about what is happening in India. She has a vision of alternatives to the present management of the world, based on aspects and social forces that have been naturalized and marginalized, of no concern from power's point of view.

In an interview, Gayatri Spivak (who is also Indian, although living in the US) is reported to have said: "Women and men today may have to take 'the risk of essence' in order to think differently." (Gayatri Spivak with Ellen Rodney, 1994:153). I tend to agree. I think the intellectual challenge is in the field of 'essentialism': How to think differently, without being entangled in the dichotomies. The most tricky and difficult

dichotomy in this case being the old sex/gender one. How to think the body, and the specific female body, beyond 'biology'?

Rosi Braidotti et.al. (1994) seem to have similar concerns. I don't know if their formulations are of any help, but maybe: "We shall argue next that a trend seems to be emerging that *emphasizes the situated, specific, embodied nature of the feminist subject*, while rejecting biological or psychic essentialism. This is a new kind of female embodied materialism. When speaking of subjectivity, one must begin with embodiment, that is of real-life women as biocultural, empirical subjects. It is essential to note the extent to which feminist post-modernist positions have assimilated the insights of psychoanalysis and post-structuralist theory, namely that bodily experience can neither be reduced to the biological, nor confined to social conditioning. In a new form of 'corporeal materialism', the body is seen not as a natural given or a biological essence, but rather as an area of intersection of the natural with the cultural, where multiple codes of power and knowledge are at work. The body is not an essence, and therefore not an anatomical destiny: it is an individual's primary location in the world, one's primary situation in reality. Consequently, in the radical feminist philosophies of sexual difference, the strategy of repossessing the body aims at elaborating alternative forms of knowledge and representation of the subject. The embodied nature of subjectivity is posited so as to allow for the radical subversion of culture" (Rosi Braidotti et al. 1994: 49-50)

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